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Three easy steps to increase uni rankings

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Abstract

University league tables are increasingly influential. Australian universities lucky enough to appear in the Jiao Tong, Times Higher Education or other world rankings can tout their positions as a way of attracting students and funds.

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University league tables are increasingly influential. Australian universities lucky enough to appear in the Jiao Tong, Times Higher Education or other world rankings can tout their positions as a way of attracting students and funds.

One way of rising in the league tables is to hire researchers who are authors of lots of highly-cited papers in top journals. However, within Australia, this is a zero-sum game, as there are only so many such researchers to go around. It is time to be more innovative in the quest for a really impressive rank. Here are three possibilities.

(1) Mandate that all papers submitted to top journals have more authors - perhaps ten at a minimum. This will raise citation rates immediately. This clever strategy relies on a quirk in the way citations are counted. If you co-author a paper with a colleague, the two of you are credited with one paper in total, but when the paper is cited, each of you receives a citation. If the two of you share authorship on all your otherwise sole-authored papers, your combined citation counts will double.

With ten authors for each paper, citation rates will be ten times as great as with sole-authored papers. Citations can escalate even more as co-authorship reaches into the hundreds. Given the overheads for coordinating co-authorship, it would be easiest if a central agency assigned authorship, keeping a record of who actually did the work. Any recalcitrant academics should be denied research support.

(2) In each Australian state, one university should be designated as the top prospect for league table

improvement. Every productive academic at other universities in the state should be formally assigned to be a staff member of the top prospect.

The University of Queensland has the best ranking in Queensland, so productive researchers at Griffith, James Cook and other universities in the state should be administratively relabelled as UQ staff. They can sit in the same offices and teach the same classes, but be counted as UQ for the purposes of publications and citations. UQ is then bound to rise in the rankings.

This strategy will enable at least five Australian universities to really shine in the rankings. Top researchers at the University of Tasmania can be assigned to ANU. Universities that refuse to participate should be denied research funding.

(3) Amalgamate all the universities in Australia into one. The number of publications, citations and so forth should be enough to propel this combined university into the top ten in the world.

What should it be called? The most representative name is the Australian National University, which already has an excellent reputation. What is now Sunshine Coast University can become the ANU campus at Sunshine Coast. Any current university that wants to retain its name should be defunded. All funding will go to the ANU.

This strategy has some beneficial spin-offs. It is well known that many students seek, above all, a degree from a prestigious university. Some may forgo a high quality education at the University of Ballarat for a so-so education at Sydney or Melbourne, because degrees at Sydney and Melbourne have far greater prestige.

With all degrees in the country from the ANU, students won't need to choose between education quality and status. They can choose the best place to study and have an ANU degree regardless. This will also simplify overseas student recruitment and reduce unproductive duplication of effort.

The beauty of these strategies is that there is no need to increase the actual performance of Australian universities. As a result of ERA, universities now have a great capacity to massage their publication data to give the greatest appearance of quality. By getting

universities to cooperate rather than compete, and by adopting innovative strategies, the same staff and research output can be used to move up in the world rankings.

There might be a problem down the track, as other countries adopt the same strategies. So there is no time to be lost.

Brian Martin is professor of social sciences at the University of Wollongong.

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